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ARCHITECTURE

By Michael Sorkin

Not too long ago I was schmoozing with Lebbeus Woods when he produced a current copy of the *Encyclopedia Brittanica Book of the Year*. In the entry under "Physics" he pointed to a variety of advances in understanding the nature of matter, to new theorizings as to the cosmological imperatives of the universe. Then he turned to the entry marked "Architecture." Here, there was a photograph of the AT&T Building.

For the past decade or so, in a vast opus of visionary drawings, Leb Woods has been working to redress this imbalance. He has set himself the task of reinfusing architectural poetics with the expression of cultural evolution, and rescuing the use of Big Science from the ever more quaint ruminations of traditional modernism on one hand and the banalities of *Star Trek* on the other. Woods is one of the heroes of this struggle to redeem the future as a central trope in architectural speculation. Clearly, though, he finds himself poised at some sort of a crossroads, the visionary's eternal conundrum, the moment of doubting whether drawing is enough.

In Woods's recent work, notably the series of drawing produced under the rubrics "Aeon" and "Region," the sci-fi problematic is inescapable. For this he's hardly culpable: the architectural community has ceded proprietorship of images of things to come to those operatives in the culture who have an abiding interest in using them—which is to say, Hollywood. Yet Hollywood's hegemony shouldn't divert attention from genuine differences in Woods's production. For, despite the somewhat occluding metaphysical and narrative apparatus he attaches to it, his is a formal investigation of genuinely architectural character. In all of it, issues of space making, geometry, combination, elision, and other basics are close at hand. Social implications are less consequential: this is not utopian work, it's fantastic—images of buildings, presented enthusiastically, like the travel sketchbook of the first architect on Mars.

Three of Woods's most current projects were recently shown at the Storefront for Art and Architecture, a shoestring venture virtually alone among New York venues in promoting a polemical, activist view of architecture. The theme that purports to unite the three—for Paris, Times Square, and an undesignated site in the Midwest—is that of "centers." A few meanings are intended. First, Woods is preoccupied with the idea of buildings as nodal, with marking points. The Times Square building (on the Times Tower Site) is an *axis mundi* (beloved of neo-Platonists), a literal crossroads of the world. A gorgeous rendering depicts Times Square on the eve of the millennium, as a mysterious golden sphere descends from God knows where to alight on the landing platform of the tower: a truly evocative synthesis of *Close Encounters*, dirigible moorings at the Empire State, and the old New Year's falling ball. The midwestern project—for what Woods calls an "Epicyclarium"—is even more overtly nodal, rendered in another gorgeous drawing as what looks to be a point on some galactic grid. These are images both naive and profound, a distinction largely swept away by the power of Woods's technique.

The fixation with centers is also evoked in a persistent fascination with spheres, the centroid's centroid. The Paris project and the Epicyclarium are literally spherical, the former proposing a giant orb as the termination of the great axis of the Champs Elysee. The Epicyclarium is at once more concrete and more diffuse. It is meant to house devices that create—on a 30-foot disc suspended above a viewing floor—a two-dimensional "global image," kind of a kaleidoscopic representation of the state of knowledge as we know it. Now, this is an ingratiating, if somewhat overweening, metaphor for artistic enterprise but one that must be taken in the proper light. It serves to identify the work in front of us—a pretty, domestically scaled, rather antique and picturesque little building—with a larger enterprise; it purifies. It also offers rebuke to current species of historicizing by choosing a 19th century, Jules Vernean, vision of fantastical architecture to house a late 20th century fantasy. It's a blow in favor of the history of leaps forward into the unknown instead of backwards into archival certitudes. It neatly evades the present by viewing the future from the past. ■